

Hands across the water

Women's human rights Web site a beacon to many

BY PETER BAKOGEORGE
For Law Times

It's one sign of the Web site's far-reaching impact that the director has to be so guarded, carefully picking her words as she relates some of her project's successes.

There's the country — which she doesn't name, of course — that was undergoing constitutional reform, and some people there knew they could use the project's help. But they didn't want to be seen accessing the information, so they had it passed on through intermediaries in New York.

And then there's the case of the women who are jailed in an African country for killing abusive spouses. She provides few details — and admits to being “cautious” in her choice of words — as she tells of the women's advocates accessing her materials for help.

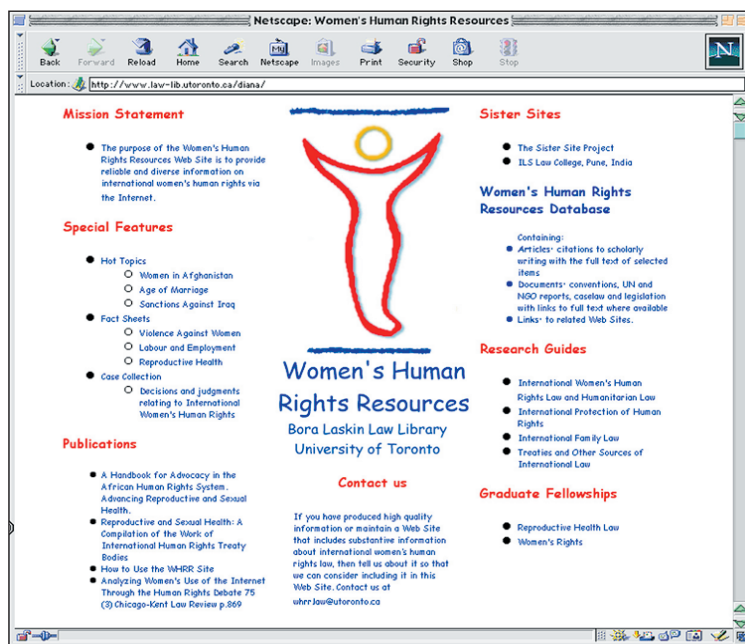
What Reem Bahdi and her colleagues at the Bora Laskin Law Library have compiled is information, and it has become a powerful tool for those who deal in the issues of women's human rights.

The Women's Human Rights Resources Web site (www.lawlib.utoronto.ca/Diana/) is now in its seventh year of bringing together significant materials on women's rights, and trying to make them easily accessible worldwide.

It isn't all subterfuge.

The mandate is to provide information that can be used “to assist individuals and organizations in using international women's human rights law to promote women's rights.”

It's intended for an audience ranging from community groups and women's advocates, to



The Bora Laskin Law Library at the University of Toronto compiled information, which has become a powerful tool for those dealing with women's human rights.

researchers and governments — even to judges, “so they can incorporate international human rights law into their decision-making,” according to the Web site.

Bahdi, a lawyer who is also the equality adviser to the Ontario Bar Association, says the site is “unique” for its wide range of materials and its accessibility.

One of her colleagues working on the site, Marylin Raisch, calls it “an online education tool, as well as a database.”

The project began in 1995, after University of Toronto law professor Rebecca Cook, along with Valerie Oosterveld, published “A Select Bibliography of Women's Human Rights” in the *American University Law Review*.

At about the same time, the U of T was working as part of a consortium with some major U.S. universities, and one of the projects was to continue the legacy of a librarian who had worked in the area of human rights.

Establishing the Web site on

women's human rights fell to the U of T. But, the site gets no money from the law school. It's paid for by external funding, and has received money from the United Nations family planning agency and from the World Bank, among others.

What it contains is a wide range of materials, divided into more than two-dozen subject areas.

Within any subject area, users can choose to view scholarly articles and books. Where possible, there are links to the full text versions of the material.

Each subject will also give the user the option to access documents, which include conventions and treaties, United Nations and non-governmental organization reports, case law, and legislation.

There are also links out of each subject area to other Web sites.

It provides a lot of information quite close to its simple home page.

For example, clicking on the subject “violence against women” takes the user to a short quote from the UN general assembly's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and then to a brief description of the topics covered in the category.

Clicking on “articles,” turns up 47 of them, many available in full text. There are 77 items in “documents,” ranging from case law to NGO reports, and there are 14 listings that come up under “books.” There are also eight links to other Web sites dealing with the topic.

In addition to the main subject areas, the site has “special features.” That includes fact sheets on issues such as labour and employment, and “hot topics,” which currently includes background information on women in Afghanistan and sanctions against Iraq.

Raisch, who is the librarian for international and foreign law at the Bora Laskin Library, says the site has been used extensively by groups ranging from major North American women's organizations, anti-poverty groups, and those who are working with women in remote African communities.

She says it averages 21,000 hits a month, and had 40,000 hits one month.

What they look for on the site, according to both Raisch and Bahdi, is changing.

Where the greatest demand used to be access to conventions and UN documents, Bahdi says there now seems to be more interest in accessing scholarly journal articles.

She says that's likely because the site makes so many of them available in full text, which means that individuals or organizations who couldn't afford to get

them through subscriber databases are now taking advantage of them being available for free.

The Web site is simple in its design, something its developers say is the result of a conscious decision to make sure it is accessible throughout the world, and to users operating without the most modern technology.

“We want this to be technology-friendly, to all levels of technology,” says Raisch.

“When it comes to information of this type, we don't see the need for bells and whistles. It's the quality of the information that matters.”

There is no Java, or frames, the files are kept as small as possible, and the navigation is simple.

Bahdi says it's clearly been a huge success. She says she receives e-mail from users worldwide, and gets other feedback that indicates it's being well-received.

It has also had some high praise from high places.

Jan Cellucci (the wife of U.S. ambassador to Canada Paul Cellucci) says that “technically and intellectually, this site is poised to become the most important resource of its kind in the world.”

Cellucci, a librarian who has held a senior position at Boston College, came across it while surveying Canadian research libraries.

“The librarians have selected and organized the most substantive, relevant, and reliable information, using a database structure that enables broad accessibility to users worldwide,” she says in an e-mail interview.

She adds one indication of the importance of the site is that it is the only resource listed under the heading “women's rights” on the Harvard University Law Library's online guide to foreign and international law resources. **LT**